Tree City tradition has deep roots in Somerville

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Inventory, bylaw are latest links

By Danielle Dreilinger, Globe Correspondent | May 21, 2009

When they bought their house in Somerville in 1997, Jonathan Rich and Bill Bennett planned an architectural, straight-edged garden with multihued foliage. Trouble was, Norway and silver maples lined the back of the yard, just beyond the property line. They're notoriously difficult to garden under, said Rich, 52.

They agreed: The trees had to go. In 2001, with neighbors' consent, they did.

But that's not where the story ends. Because Rich and Bennett love trees. They replaced the maples with a katsura and two Japanese cedars that shimmer in the breeze.

They aren't alone. This city, where residents outnumber trees by about 2 to 1, is nuts about them - enough to maintain forestry programs during a budget shortfall.

This month, the city starts an inventory to count and measure every public tree. Last month, the Board of Aldermen passed an ordinance to protect them beyond existing state standards.

As unlikely as it may sound, the most densely populated city in New England is an Arbor Day Foundation-certified Tree City USA, meaning it has a community forestry program with a budget of at least $2 per person.

Last year, Mayor Joseph Curtatone pledged to increase the city's trees by at least 20 percent by 2012. The city plants 150 to 250 trees per year, at a cost of between $200 and $650 per tree, according to Brad Arndt, who directs the city's Urban Tree Initiative. According to the city's latest Tree City application, the budget for tree planting, maintenance, and staff salaries ran to just over $200,000 in the 2008 fiscal year.

Somerville has long had a love for trees. According to city spokesman Tom Champion, in the 1980s then-mayor Gene Brune planted trees enthusiastically; then-mayor Mike Capuano (now a US representative) pursued the "Tree City" title in the 1990s.

However, the pace of developments picked up last November when a group of residents came together over a huge willow on private property, nicknamed Belinda, that came down after its owner determined it to be a safety hazard. They're now an advocacy group, Somerville 4 Trees.

Arndt estimated that the city has between 6,000 and 10,000 public trees and 30,000 to 50,000 overall.

They're pretty but more than that, Arndt said; when he looks at maples and ash, he sees "green infrastructure that provides very measurable, very concrete benefits," he said on May 7 while walking on fallen crabapple and pear tree blossoms by City Hall. "Each individual tree is providing a measurable service" - raising property values, reducing storm water runoff, sucking up carbon, saving energy.

The inventory will put a dollar value on every single tree. Starting this week and continuing through next month, arborists will buzz around like bees, recording each public tree in a GPS-coded database. (The workers will be suited up like Ghostbusters; the police have been alerted.)

The results will go online as a publicly accessible map so residents know what they're hugging.

The inventory's price tag, approximately $50,000, sounds like a lot in a budget shortfall. However, Arndt said, the maintenance work pays for itself, citing a 2006 Providence study that found the city derived $3.33 in energy savings and additional taxes from higher property assessments for every $1 spent on its trees. He's also looking for additional funding.

The information from the inventory will help a new tree committee make decisions about those future plantings. Which matters because trees squooshed among houses and next to pavement can cause problems.

Some of the invasive maple species that dominate the urban landscape spread saplings quickly. Complaints brought to the Board of Aldermen included roots infiltrating underground pipes and creating crumpled, impassable sidewalks, and leaves clogging roof gutters.

State law already protects trees. Somerville's new ordinance makes that process more public.

Under the rules, a resident who wants a tree toppled must pay for the city to notify neighbors of a hearing on the request, and contribute to a tree replacement fund. (There is a hardship exemption.) And each tree must be replaced within a year.

Advocates, especially Somerville 4 Trees, have been "very, very vocal," Arndt said. Some want to extend protections to trees on private property, similar to historic designations for houses.

Rich and Bennett (who heads the Somerville Garden Club) struggled over the decision to take down a 50-foot maple. They felt better once they saw the sawed-off trunk; "about eight feet above ground, the trunk was like a doughnut," Rich said.

He saw practical benefits to replacing the trees. An Adirondack chair sits in comfortable shade beneath the katsura, which hides a neighbor's garage.

On a deeper level, though, he felt it was the right thing to do. "I think big trees are important," Rich said. "We took out full-scale trees and we felt like we should replace them."

They also want to plant a tree or two in the small front yard.

A purportedly shrub-sized Japanese maple is springing up tall, its lacy five-fingered leaves edged with red. A willowy young stuartia waves above greens. An uncommon cinnamon-bark stuartia sprig pokes up in a plot that really doesn't have room for it.

"I don't know what we're going to do when it gets big," Rich said, but "I had to have one." ■